

FEB 26 1964

Steady, Mr. President

STATINTL

The Johnson administration has badly mismanaged its public statements on the most vital foreign issue facing the United States today: the war in Vietnam. The President and his various spokesmen have made a long series of contradictory comments, spread over a good many weeks now, that have confused the specialists let alone the American people.

We do not wish to be unduly harsh. President Kennedy had his Bay of Pigs roughly three months after he took office. President Johnson has had the same amount of time before a real crisis, much more serious than Panama or Guantanamo, has begun to blow up in Vietnam. He has been preoccupied with domestic matters.

And this is no Bay of Pigs affair. What is obviously happening is a top-level review of United States policy on the war in Southeast Asia. At such a time the differing viewpoints battling behind the scenes in Washington begin to leak out.

Nevertheless the confusion is especially painful and dangerous right now. No one has to be reminded that this is an election year. Governor Rockefeller has announced a damaging list of administration statements that contradict each other. (We could substantially enlarge the list.) Mr. Nixon has said he is hardening his foreign policy line and does not like the smell of things in South

Vietnam. Senator Dodd, who fought so hard for Tshombe and Katanga in the Congo crisis is out with a statement saying withdrawal of American support for the Diem regime was based on a "hoax" perpetrated by American newsmen who committed a "sordid propaganda fraud" in exaggerating persecutions of the Buddhists. There are all the ingredients, legitimate and exaggerated, of Vietnam becoming another Cuba in terms of a high noise level of public emotion, concern, and confusion.

The President holds the key to this. He can hasten the decision process. Meantime he can avoid having such responsible officials as himself and Messrs. Rusk, McNamara, and Mansfield giving out statements that are only partially true and misleading, or openly at odds with each other.

We cannot believe that President Johnson would or could accept United States withdrawal from Vietnam or false neutralization. This would be worse than the Bay of Pigs. He can, however, threaten to carry the war to North Vietnam. His decision on this point is of the utmost importance and we will discuss it in another editorial. Until he decides, the administration must take the lead and thereby help others in the presidential campaign to do the same, in keeping comments at the level of the utmost discretion and responsibility.